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Archival Chronicle: Vol 13 No 2

Bowling Green State University. Center for Archival Collections

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Recommended Citation

Bowling Green State University. Center for Archival Collections, "Archival Chronicle: Vol 13 No 2" (1994). *Archival Chronicle*. 37.

https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/archival_chronicle/37

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Archival Chronicle

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August 1994: Volume 13, Number 2

[Archival Chronicle Index](#) | [CAC Homepage](#)

Politics from the Grass Roots



🚩 *Citizens of Seneca County and Fostoria show their support of Warren G. Harding by gathering near his home in Marion, Ohio on the day he was selected to run as the Republican candidate for president in 1920. CAC General Photograph Collection.*

"You can't fight City Hall," runs an old adage, yet private citizens and special interest groups do so regularly and often win. Local government units are structured to allow for maximum citizen participation through regular elections and public meetings. State law requires a host of records to be created, preserved, and made available to the public to assure government accountability. Newspapers report both the workings of the government and citizens' efforts to work with or change it.

The County is the largest unit of local government, created by the state as its representative to carry out state laws and policies. Board of Commissioners *Journals*, or the minutes of their meetings, are maintained permanently and are published in local newspapers. Some of the earliest such records found at the Center for Archival Collections include Huron County (1815-1837), Sandusky County (1820-1959), Lucas and Van Wert Counties (1835-1973), and Wood County (1836-1901). A Board of Commissioners is responsible for administering the levying of taxes, building projects (such as roads, bridges, and ditches), public welfare, and security. Land use and taxes have always been of vital interest and the most likely to inspire controversy. Land development means changes in jobs and the local economy, and no one likes seeing their tax dollars wasted. *Deed Records*, *Tax Lists*, *Reappraisements*, and *Annual Financial Reports* are among those records created to document the financial and land transactions by and within the county.

The township, first established with the Ordinance of 1787, became a political subdivision of the state of Ohio in 1803, and has only those powers granted to it by the state. Over the years, its functions have changed and grown. Today, a board of three trustees and a clerk, elected to serve four-year terms, fulfill their duties on a part-time basis. In the past, elected officials also have included treasurers, assessors, and members of boards of health and education. These officials were (and are) likely to be members of the public more interested in working for their community's good than in seeking political advancement. Their constituents are their immediate neighbors, so response to local concerns can be both swift and controversial. The CAC preserves records from many townships in northwest Ohio, including *Cemetery Lot Records*, *Ditch Journals*, *Justice of the Peace Dockets*, *Board of Education Minutes*, and *Road Tax Records*. Most records, however, remain in the custody of the townships themselves. Researchers are advised to contact the CAC or the township clerk for information about holdings of specific records.

Municipal government is highly functional, providing a wide range of services such as police and fire protection, utilities, road construction and maintenance, and health services. Municipal records reflect the administration of these services and preserve a record of the public meetings of the officials.

A government reform movement swept the country around the turn of the last century, resulting in a restructuring of local government systems and laws to assure that meetings would be public and records would be preserved and accessible. Mayor Samuel Jones of Toledo (MS 204) was prominent among America's reform mayors. William B. Guitteau (MS 16), a Toledo educator, was also influential in local school and government reform. Since 1916, the *Toledo City Journal* has reported on municipal departments' activities, including commission meetings. The CAC also holds a collection of photographs prepared by that city's Board of Publicity and Efficiency during the 1950s, depicting public works and municipal employees at their jobs.

Special interest groups represent the most organized form of grass-roots politics. For instance, prohibitionist groups, such as the WCTU chapters in Amsden (MS 187), Bettsville (MS 216), and Defiance County (MMS 395), and labor unions (for example, see the Sam Pollock Collection MS 468) were organized to achieve specific political, economic, and social goals. Women's clubs were particularly active in community improvement efforts involving libraries, schools, parks, and sanitation. Among the collections held at the CAC are those of the Sandusky Federation of Women's Clubs (MS 228) and the Lima Federation of Women's Clubs (MS 533).

Sealed bids for the expansion of Toledo's waterworks are opened at a public meeting November 6, 1954. The bidding procedure is meant to assure honesty as well as economy in the letting of contracts paid for with public money. Toledo Commission of Publicity and Efficiency, CAC General Photograph Collection. 📌



Newspapers are also a useful source for the study of grass-roots politics. The minutes and other records produced by government offices or even political organizations are brief summaries of activities. Newspapers, through their feature articles, editorials, and especially the letters to the editor columns reflect the popular concerns of the general public and can report in far greater detail the meetings and activities of both government offices and other organizations. Competing newspapers from the same locality often reflect the views of opposing political parties.

National concerns develop from and are reflected by local concerns. The forces which shape our communities and have a direct bearing on our daily lives can be seen in action through local politics. Thanks to the records created and preserved by these organizations and government agencies, we can learn how our communities developed.

—Lee N. McLaird